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ABSTRACT

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ON BILINGUAL COMPETENCE.

Abstract.

An examination of recent linguistic and sociolinguistic studies on bilingualism has resulted in a reappraisal of the notion of interference. The implications of this reappraisal lead to the conclusion that the principles of transformational generative grammar could successfully be applied to the study of bilingualism if the bilingual's mental grammar is considered as forming a unified system.

Résumé.

L'examen des recherches linguistiques et sociolinguistiques les plus récentes dans le domaine du bilinguisme a conduit à une réévaluation de la notion d'interférence. Les implications de cette réévaluation font apparaître que les principes de la grammaire transformationnelle générative pourraient être appliqués avec fruit à l'étude du bilinguisme dans la mesure où la grammaire mentale d'un bilingue est considérée comme un seul système unifié.

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There has been a tendency for many 'linguistic' studies on bilingualism up to the present time to concentrate on the output resulting from the contact of two language systems, i.e. on performance data. This state of affairs has been deplored by Gumperz and Wilson (1971, 151), who consider it a more vital issue to study the mechanisms involved in bilingualism. It would seem that an awareness of these mechanisms, be they linguistic and/or sociolinguistic, is certainly a necessary prerequisite to the construction of a theory of bilingualism.

Our aim in this paper is to discuss the notion of LINGUISTIC competence with reference to bilingualism. If it can be shown how this notion ties in with some of the hypotheses on the COMMUNICATIVE competence of bilinguals (as dealt with, for example, by Gumperz, 1972), then a more coherent picture of BILINGUAL COMPETENCE (both linguistic and communicative) should be the result. This presupposes that students of bilingualism and theoretical linguists can find some shared notions and terminology. It is felt that the most relevant and useful common terms of reference are to be discovered in transformational generative grammar.

Transformational generative grammar is a competence grammar describing the universal conditions that limit the form and organisation of rules in the grammar of human language. In spite of statements based on a strict interpretation of Chomsky (1965, 3), transformational generative grammar need not necessarily restrict itself to monoglot cases event though most generative grammarians have limited their studies to single language investigation. Indeed, there is no a-priori reason to suggest that this form of grammar cannot mirror the linguistic competence of a speaker-hearer who is not a monoglot. Sorensen (1972, 91) has made this fact most categorically clear in his study of a South American speech community;

> " A number of details in the (....) description of the multilingual society in the Central Northwest Amazon force some reconsideration of certain basic premises of transformational linguistic theory. Chomsky (1965, 3-9) states that linguistic theory is concerned with the tacit knowledge of an ideally fluent monolingual speaker-hearer in a homogeneous speech community. An ideally fluent speaker-hearer in the Central Northwest Amazon has to be someone who is not monolingual. There is also the question of what is to be considered a homogeneous speech community. A linguistic theory linked to one-language - one-group situations is inadequate to explain the actual linguistic competence of the people of the Central Northwest Amazon".
> (Cf. also Gumperz, 1972; Hasselmo, 1972).

An examination of the literature reveals considerable lack of agreement amongst students of bilingualism as to what the proper limits of their field of investigation are. Witness the plethora of conflicting definitions on bilingualism as cited in, for example, Béziers and Van Overbeke (1968, 111-120). A prerequisite to any investigation of a scientific nature would of necessity seem to be some clear definition of its scope and its limitations. Evidently, for an adequate LINGUISTIC theory of bilingualism, non-linguistic elements must be discarded from existing definitions. More generally, those based on an examination of the PHENOMENA of bilingualism, i.e. performance, must equally be treated with caution. For the theoretical linguist the aim should be to characterise the mental grammar of the bilingual, that is his competence.

Frequently a bilingual's competence in two languages has been inferred from his interference-free performance in both as measured against the L1 performance of two separate monoglots. An approach accounting for the bilingual's system or systems without reference to monoglot norms, however, should be as revealing about the former's linguistic competence as is a similar approach in the case of the monoglot (Cook, 1969). More recent studies of bilingualism seem to be tending towards this line of thinking (Gumperz, 1967; 1972; Hasselmo, 1972; Labov, 1971 a).

Central to the argument around a bilingual's linguistic competence is the notion of 'interference'. In an examination of interference features in the gender system of the languages along the Indo-Aryan/Dravidian border, Gumperz and Wilson (1971) proved a tendency towards isomorphism in the speech of their polyglot informants. The authors provide evidence to show that in the context they studied, the same rules, a single set of rules, will account for a single syntactic surface structure, differences in sentences being attributed to variations in morphophonemic rules (155).

As long ago as 1941, Swadesh put forward the idea that at the phonological level phonemes belonging to the languages of Russian-English bilinguals are merged into one complex system in which [t], [t'] and [t^h] all occur in identical environments so that,

> "the two sets of sounds....., from the standpoint of phonemic theory, can be regarded as a single system." (65)

Weinreich (1968, 8-9) expressed doubts about this conclusion, preferring to restate the facts in terms of two co-existent systems. However, in an often overlooked footnote (for example by Titone, 1973, 30), Weinreich indicated that his doubts applied to interference in the SPEECH of bilinguals, which should be distinguished

from the language as a system. He also went on to indicate that in describing the more or less established 'borrowings' in a LANGUAGE, a single phonemic system was often to be preferred. By this token Weinreich did not excluded the possibility of considering bilingual competence in terms of a single system, even if bilingual performance does not always clearly reflect this.

Most bilinguals would seem to have a tendency to exploit any points of resemblance between their two or more languages to the fullest (Graham, 1956). In most recorded cases it has been shown to be almost impossible for the bilingual to keep his two language systems (that is, if they are two systems) totally free from interference as measured by the monoglot norm. Richard Diebold (1962, 59) noted this quite clearly, observing that ;

> "....even with a speaker's conscious efforts to offset interference.... Greek-English co-ordinate bilinguals cannot switch to one language in the context of the other without incurring phonemic interference....
>
> This suggests to me that we need to review our still imperfect notions of what is involved in the separability of two language codes in the same speaker."

The same phenomenon appears to be present when bidialectal speakers switch from one dialect to another. Given this tendency, so-called interference features could possibly be seen as a reflex of the bilingual's unified language system which falls outside the related two or more L1 systems. Strong evidence to illustrate this argument, as suggested by Weinreich, is provided by the 'integration' of loanwords and their possible effects on the phonemic and morphemic systems of both languages used by bilinguals (Vogt, 1954).

At this stage it is important to look into the notion of 'norm specification'. From what has already been said it is clear that what may be considered as interference by monoglot standards may well not be so in the case of bilinguals. Where this 'interference' is constant, or a permanent feature, then it can no longer be considered as interference, since it forms a part of the grammar (Le Page, 1967, 144). Therefore, in order to discover a bilingual's competence his code must be defined and described in terms of its internal consistency rather than by reference to monoglot standards (Hasselmo, 1967, 133-134).

Is should not be forgotten either that, for the socio-linguist or student of biculturalism, even a total switch from language to language may not fall outside the linguistically homogeneous speech community requirement of the transformational grammarian. As Sankoff has pointed out 5 (1972, 33) in a bilingual speech

community the kind of linguistic behaviour involved (e.g., shifting, or switching, among the various codes available) is not limited to multilinguals, that is, it does not differ qualitatively from the behaviour of monoglots - shifting of styles or level. In other words, code-switching is better analysed in terms of a single system, with variations which correlate highly with societal and situational as well as linguistic constraints (Sankoff, 1972, 37).

Hasselmo (1972, 261) takes up a standpoint similar to that of Sankoff with reference to Swedish-American bilinguals, arguing that code-switching can, from the point of view of one of the languages, be viewed as the resolution of linguistic tension through the utilisation of elements from the other language. Instead of following strictly the extreme norms represented by one of the original languages, the bilingual may reduce language distance through the use of lexical items and syntactic, morphological and phonological features from the other language. Code-switching is seen as a set of options which constitute an aspect of a bilingual's competence.

Hasselmo has concentrated on linguistic rather than communicative competence in his study, setting up a model for American-Swedish which takes into account lexical conversion rules, switching rules, conversion formulas involving the substitution of a surface unit from one language for one from another, a repertoire model based on vertical and intralinguistic rules (on the assumption that the totality of the bilingual's behaviour is a manifestation of an overall code, a single American-Swedish grammar), notions of grammaticality and ungrammaticality, productivity and restrictions.

The two models as suggested by Sankoff and by Hasselmo seem to be complementary in that the linguistic component of a bilingual's competence determines what options are open to him in terms of a single unified system, while the communicative component specifies which choice(s) will be made in a given situation.

That there is a certain amount of common ground between the transformational grammarian and the student of bilingualism is clear from the preceeding discussion. This does not, however, preclude possible complications of a different order.

As is well known, transformational grammar is a theory which claims validity in situations of language acquisition, this acquisition being tempered by very general physiological and neurological constraints. Grave doubts have been expressed, however, as to its validity in second-language learning situations (Ingram, 1971). Any attempt to define a bilingual must take this issue into account. A recent paper by Baetens Beardsmore (1974) suggested that the distinction between the compound and the coordinate bilingual was essentially determined by the acquisition/learning process involved, the compound bilingual having acquired 2 x L1, the coordinate having acquired one L1 and learnt an L2 at some stage beyond the critical age of more or less 11 years. If this distinction holds good it allows for the possibility of a transformational

approach, at least to the case of the compound bilingual (though perhaps not to Richard Diebold's coordinate case). Evidence to support this is to be found in Rūke-Dravina (1967, 19), who noted that the bilingual child she investigated was not aware of the existence of two languages in its speech before the age of 3 while later awereness of the two emerged only gradually.

What are the conclusions that can be drawn from the above line of argument ? It would seem that the notion of interference requires further investigation since if what we propose holds good interference cannot be purely a matter of performance. It would also appear that the constraints on what can be considered as interference are not primarily social but linguistic in nature, though the two are closely interrelated. On the assumption that interference belongs to the linguistic aspect of bilingual competence it is legitimate to postuale that it can be represented as an additional set of choices open to the bilingual, these choices being somehow determined by the communicative aspect of his competence (i.e. social constraints determining the type and amount of interference produced by a bilingual in a given speech situation). In this way interference becomes a part of the grammar of a bilingual but is a function of the interrelatedness of his two languages.

The above conclusions have serious implications for the linguistic definition of bilingualism. Many students of the phenomena have seen it as an extreme point on a cline which ranges from monolingualism, through bicodalism and bidialectism, to bilingualism. Since monolingualism is not considered as being monolithic, particularly since Labov's work on New York speech, any linguistic definition of bilingualism may well have strong points of convergence with more general definitions of any individual's grammar. Labov has stated (1971 b, 188) that :

> "...as in many other cases, our conclusions agree with the general point of view expressed by Chomsky that dialects of a language are apt to differ from each other in low-level rules, and that superfical differences are greater than those differences (if any) in their deep structures".

It might well be that the same applies to 'bilingual dialects' of a language if they are treated in the same way, and if the constraints on the form of a bidialectal's grammar are similar to those on that of the bilingual.

The conflicting opinions amongst theoretical linguists can be of great value to the study of bilingualism, just as the study of bilingualism in a manner which treats compound and coordinate bilinguals as two different problems could be of use to the purely theoretical linguist. If it can be proved that acquisition and learning are two

fundamentally different process this will lead to a reappraisal by bilingual students of their definition of bilingualism and a re-examination of the data. The exercise should allow one to unravel what is linguistically (i.e. theoretically) specific to bilingualism (or certain types of bilingualism) and what not. It would also allow for clarification as to what are the purely linguistic problems of bilingualism as opposed to the purely socio-linguistic problems.

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